

A BALANCING ACT

There are certain things that happen to you during your career that end up being the ultimate learning experiences. Not because you did the right thing, but because you did it completely wrong. You look back and ask yourself, “Why did I do this? It made no sense.” Then you lay out all the ways that you could have handled the situation better.

BY LYNDA RUTLEDGE

FOR WOMEN ESPECIALLY, THIS TYPE OF SITUATION CROPS UP all the time. We are trying to pull our weight as contributing members of the workforce, but we also believe that we have to be perfect wives and perfect mothers. We want to maintain the 1950s sitcom home. And we want to do that while having a fulfilling career. It's like a juggling act, and every now and then we're going to drop a ball or two. That's when you figure out which balls really have to stay in the air. It's one of the learning experiences that I'm talking about.

My lesson came during an extremely stressful time in my career in the mid-'90s. I was working on an Air Force program using intense simulation techniques. This made it crucial that all five contractors involved, along with the Government, stayed on the same page. To achieve this, we were working six months of weekends and long hours.

Besides that, two hurricanes hit our area within three weeks of one another. There were homes upturned, insurance companies to deal with, and many people couldn't get to work. The base was shut down two or three times in the midst of the disasters.

Still, we were desperately trying to get on contract within six months. It seemed impossible, given all our obstacles, and our days got longer and longer. We ended up flying to meet other members of our simulation group for a weeklong session out of town. We were

scheduled the following week to brief our Program Executive Officer, so we holed ourselves up to prepare.

DROPPING THE BALL...

At this time I had a Technical Director who was frequently out of work, and we'd have to bring her up to speed when she came back. We had worked to prepare for this weeklong session from seven in the morning to nine at night. She was out during this period as we attempted to lay out everything we'd need for the briefing.

With next week's deadline looming overhead, I knew that we'd have to start putting the actual brief together as soon as our meeting was wrapped up. We had a long flight home, so I approached my Technical Director about working on it then. “How about I get a seat next to you, we can work on the brief, and then I'll go off and generate it on my computer?” I asked her.

Initially she thought that this was a good plan. But when we got to the front desk to check in, she found out that there were not two seats available in the row she wanted. She insisted that she had to sit in the exit row. She told me, “I want to sit there, and I'm already not feeling good. We'll just come in tomorrow and work on it.”

Tomorrow was Saturday. We'd already worked weekend after weekend. My daughter was home sick with

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bronchitis, and I didn't have a babysitter for her the next day. So I told her, "Well, I don't have a babysitter. I'd really like to do it tonight on the plane if we could, or I can come in on Monday and we can hit it first thing." We still had a few days left to do that. She said, "No. I want you to come in tomorrow." I didn't know what else to do, so I said okay.

By the time I got home though, my daughter sounded pretty bad. She was four years old and had always had respiratory problems. She was coughing really harshly, and I knew from the sound that she was going to need to go to the doctor. So I thought, I'll take her with me to work, we'll knock out the briefing in a couple of hours, and then I'll be able to take her to the doctor when we're finished.

So that's what I did. I went to my boss's office the next morning, and she was talking with an engineer. They were just chatting away. At this point my daughter was really hacking; I mean, she was sounding worse and worse. Every now and then I'd poke my head into her office—holding my sick child—and ask her if we could make another plan. "Do you want me to do it first thing Monday? Can I take my kid to the doctor and come back later? Do you want me to come in on Sunday?" But she just kept telling me, "No. Just wait."

I waited outside that door for four hours. And after four hours of standing there, she came out of her office and said to me, "You know, I'm kind of tired. Why don't you go on home?" I couldn't believe what I was hearing. By that time I had long ago missed my window for the doctor.

NOBODY'S PERFECT

As it turned out, I went in on Monday, finished the briefing, and the whole thing went off without a hitch. It could've waited—well, it did wait—and it was fine. My daughter though, coughed all weekend long, and there was a lot of guilt on my part.

This was a turning point in my career. I realized that I can't do it all. I won't be the perfect mother, I won't be the perfect wife, I won't be the perfect Project Manager, or worker, or whatever title I happen to have at the moment. I also realized that I would never let anything like this happen again. I would need to keep a clear focus on balance—balancing my career and my life—and I would have to prioritize when I was faced with a situation like this one. Sometimes you just have to say no, and I've said it since then.

In my head, I lay everything out. I say to myself, "This will take priority," and then I work the long hours, do the traveling, manage everything...but there are times when I just have to say no. People usually understand

that, because not balancing your life is one of the pitfalls that many of us have experienced. You get caught up in the mission, the work, the it-has-to-be-done-right-now. Sometimes though, it can wait. Sometimes Monday is just as good as Saturday.

When you realize that, you start to realize that prioritizing your life doesn't have to come at the expense of your career. Balancing your family life and your work life actually makes you more productive. If you can balance your children, your husband, and your job, then you can start to balance your financial managers, your contracting officers, and your engineers. It's a skill that covers a broad spectrum, and one that makes you better at balancing all the aspects of Program Management. •

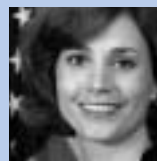
LESSONS

- In a dynamic environment of ever-changing demands, choices, and opportunities, it is essential to learn when to say no.
- Once you have established a priority, don't be afraid to actively put it first.
- In the long run, maintaining a balance between your career and your personal life will enhance your focus and productivity on both fronts.

QUESTION

When does trying to attain perfection in one aspect of your life mean neglecting another?

LEADING BY EXAMPLE



LYNDA RUTLEDGE knows how difficult it can be for a woman to juggle her family and a career in project management. But just because she recognizes these difficulties doesn't mean she wants special treatment. In fact, Rutledge wants just the opposite.

A program director once told her, "I just like to give women more latitude."

"That is when I told him, 'You're a male chauvinist,'" Rutledge says. "I could tell he was mortified. He asked me, 'What do you mean?' and I told him, 'You treat women differently than men. We don't want to be treated differently. What kind of example does that set for junior people when they see somebody senior behaving that way? Is that the example you want to set for future leaders?'"

Instead, Rutledge leads by her own example. She strives to balance her personal life with her career, to organize her priorities, and to always know when to say no. "These are skills that all good project managers need," she says.